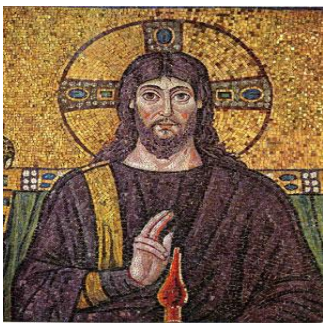




## From Yule to Christmas – the Anglo-Saxon Religious Journey

### Lesson 3 – How the Anglo-Saxons became Christians



#### What About the Romans?

The Romans occupied England, Wales and parts of Scotland for almost four hundred years. We know that Christianity was spreading throughout the Roman Empire from the first century A.D. and the first Christians who arrived here were Romans. Christianity was established in England and Wales, with churches being built, long before the Anglo-Saxons began arriving in the early fifth century. This does not mean that England and Wales were entirely Christian, there were plenty of Pagans around as well.

Christianity was established as the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 A.D. by the Emperor Theodosius and, even though there were still plenty of Pagans in the Roman Empire, as the Roman Empire in the West began to collapse and the Romans left Britain, Christianity persisted in places like France and, of course, Italy.

When the Romans left, the Anglo-Saxons began to arrive and rapidly drove the Christian Britons out of England. Many of them fled to Wales and Christianity was never extinguished there.

#### Christian Missionaries

In 597 A.D. St. Augustine of Canterbury (later called The Apostle of England) arrived on the Kent coast. He had been sent by Pope Gregory the Great to reintroduce Christianity to England. Some time before he was Pope, Gregory had seen some Angle captives being sold as slaves at a slave market in Rome; he was so struck with their noble and handsome appearance – light skin, hair and eyes – that



he said, "These are not Angles, these are Angels." And, when he became Pope, he was determined to bring Christianity to them.

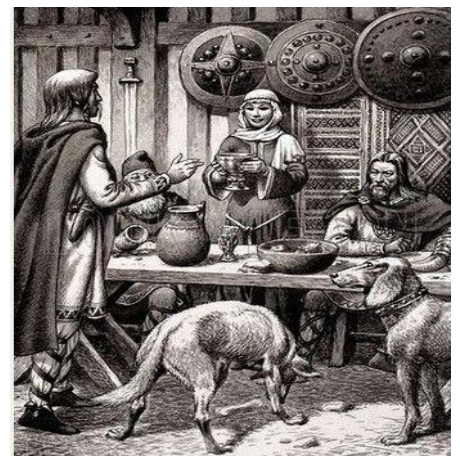


St. Augustine set the pattern for the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons in England by going straight to the King of the Anglo-Saxons in Kent, Ethelbert, and convincing him to convert to Christianity (this was made easier by the fact that Ethelbert's Queen was already a Christian). Once King Ethelbert had converted, the rest of his kingdom began to convert and Christianity began to spread rapidly in

the same way in the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

### Anglo-Saxon Christmas

The date of Christmas, 25<sup>th</sup> December, coincided with the Yule festival, so a number of traditions and practises carried over into the new, Christian celebration although, as we saw in Lesson 2, there is quite a bit of uncertainty as to which were originally Pagan and which were introduced later. We do know that the custom of having a feast and inviting family and friends was retained as an appropriate way to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.



Another tradition we know carried-over from Yule to Christmas was the Wassail; people would pass around a large bowl or jug of mulled cider and, as each person took a drink, they would say, "Wæs þu hæl", meaning "be thou hale"—i.e., "be in good health" and everyone else would say, "Drinc hæl" meaning "drink and be healthy".

### What do You Know and What do You Understand?

- 1) Use a dictionary to look up any words on this sheet you do not understand, write down the definitions in your own "Vocabulary Book". You have just increased your word-power!
- 2) In your own words, describe how the Christian missionaries managed to convert the Anglo-Saxons so quickly. **DO NOT COPY FROM THIS SHEET.**
- 3) "The Anglo-Saxons were converted from Paganism to Christianity by persuasion and debate, not by force." Say whether this statement is "True" or "False" and, in your own words, explain what happened.
- 4) Christmas has never been the most important Christian festival – find out which one is and why it is.
- 5) St Augustine in the South of England was not the only Christian missionary; there were missionaries in the North of England – do some research on the internet or in your local library and create a timeline of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons.

